

# Intangible Cultural Heritage Update

News and updates on  
Newfoundland and Labrador's  
Intangible Cultural  
Heritage Program

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## MUNFLA Mummering material to be added to the DAI

*By Barbara Gravinese*

Over the years the Department of Folklore, Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador Folklore and Language Archive has archived over 435 deposits on the topic of mummering in Newfoundland and Labrador. These items, most of them collected by individual students for folklore class projects, provide a generational record of mummering, jannying, or house visits, as they have also been called. The archived works include handwritten or typed manuscripts and transcriptions, recordings of

interviews with friends and relatives, memoirs, and photographs. Altogether they form a comprehensive view of how mummering has been practiced in this province over the past several generations, and stories people remember as far back as anyone told them.

How fortunate we are to have such a rich collection of materials to select from for the December 2009 Mummers Festival. The goal is to place some of this material on Memorial's Digital Archives Initiative (<http://collections.mun.ca>) and MUN's ICH website (<http://www.mun.ca/ich>).

Gathering these items has required some hard choices, as each archived work offers unique perspectives. To create a manageable task for our timeframe, we are currently considering archived works produced in the 1980s and 1990s, and those that will provide the widest variety of materials for use for exhibition, publicity, and website information, and a short list has been developed. In the best folklore fieldwork tradition and full respect for the continuation of informed consent, after making our final choices we will first contact the creative collectors for permission to use their words and work.

With their permission to proceed, we will then contact their informants, the people they interviewed or their relatives if they have passed on. This contact will provide all those previously involved with full disclosure of our intentions and provide us with permission to use these items with their permission as the true owners. We anticipate our calls will be met with enthusiasm and support for our 2009 celebration of mummering in Newfoundland and Labrador.

## The King of the Birds

*By Ryan Davis, Folklife Festival Intern*

*The wren, the wren, / The king of all birds. / St. Stephen's Day he was caught in the furze.*

*Although he was little, / His honour was great. / Rise up kind lady and give us a treat.  
Up with the kettle, / And down with the pan. / Give us a penny to bury the wren.  
A pocketful of money, / And a cellar full of cheer. / And we wish you all a Merry  
Christmas and a Happy New Year. – as recited by Dennis Flynn*

This coming December, the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador will launch their first folklife festival with a mummering theme. The aim is to showcase the varying forms of Christmastime house-visiting traditions across the province. The wren is one such tradition that continues here today.

Typically, children and/or adults will visit homes within their community carrying around an effigy of a small bird—the wren. Upon entry into a home, they usually recite a poem about the wren and may offer some kind of performance, be it song, joke, or recitation. Often the host will offer up food, drink, or money for the visit. Unlike other house-visiting traditions, there are no disguises involved.

The wren tradition is known to take place in Ireland and England where, in previous times, wrenboys would hunt a wren, kill it, and visit homes reciting a poem that asked for money to give the bird a proper burial. A feather from the wren might be offered to the patrons for good luck

Several weeks ago I caught up with Dennis Flynn of Colliers who has been involved with the wren since childhood. He explains,

*Growing up we used to participate in a tradition called the visitation of the wren. We never ever called it that. That's a very official title. We always just referred to it as going around with the wren, or doing the wren.... It was a Christmas visitation. We always took part on December 26th which everyone nowadays calls Boxing Day. But we always called it St. Stephen's Day.... Basically the idea would be that you'd go around on St. Stephen's Day, as a group of boys. I did it from when I was about 10 years old until about 14.... We weren't doing it necessarily to preserve any cultural tradition. We were entrepreneurial. We were kids and this was the era of twenty-cent comic books.... So for us, it was this opportunity to go around and visit some people and entertain them a little bit, and make a few cents as kids.*

The wren stick, as Dennis calls it, describes an effigy of a wren, drawn on paper or carved from wood and attached to a stick. The wren sticks that Dennis made as a child would often take a beating in harsh winter weather and so a new one would be made every year. He described whittling a splinter of wood into a dowel and attaching a bird to the top, hand-drawn and cut from a Tetley tea box (photo top right, courtesy Dennis Flynn). Another year, he recalled, his wren was cut from a piece of thick wallpaper.

Dennis said he learned about the wren from his father who, in turn, learned about the tradition from his father. Over the years in Colliers the tradition has taken on various forms. Dennis spoke about Colliers resident, John Ryan, who, along with other community members, incorporated into the tradition, their own version of a song by Tommy Makeham and Liam Clancey called “Children's Medley” which includes several lines about the wren. Dennis recalls,

*There's a line in there where they say, 'Mrs. Clancey's a very fine woman, a very fine woman, a very fine woman. Mrs. Clancey's a very fine woman. She gave us a penny to bury the wren.' But John and all those guys would come in, and if they went to Mrs. Murphy's, well Mrs.*





*Murphy would be the very fine woman, or Mrs. Whelan would be the very fine woman. So they customized it all the way along.*

Today, the tradition continues in Colliers amongst some of the youth. According to Dennis, it was a way to bring youth together with older people within the community.

Dennis says:

*It's one thing for me or you to go, as adults. But to introduce the kids—the young people—to go, you have to have a little impetus for them. So to say, 'Oh, let's colour up a wren, and let's go and tell this story, and she'll give you a few candy.' Perfect. So before you've realized it, you've indoctrinated them in the culture of visiting.... And that's exactly what it is. You have literally introduced them into a rite of passage of visiting people—of having a respect and an appreciation of older folks and traditions without them realizing what's happened.... You've made it fun for them.*

## The Iron Foot

*by Doug Wells, Harbour Breton*

This particular Iron Foot belonged to William Henry Day (Harry Day)(1878-1948) of Harbour Breton, grandfather of John Henry Day. William married Lydia Perry of Harbour Breton and they had 6 children (Elsie, Alfreda, Julia, Garfield, John Fred, and Henry). Lydia's father, Harry Perry, died from a fall on John Rose's premises in Harbour Breton. William and Lydia lived on the North Side of Harbour Breton, very near the house of Lorne and Marie Bond's today.

William was a bit of a fix-it person, a repair man, and used the iron foot for shoe repair for his family, friends, and neighbours. He installed the iron foot in a solid junk of wood that he shaped. The junk allowed the foot to stand on the floor and was held between his legs while setting on a chair to do the repair work.

Most generally, shoes would have to be completely re-tapped with a new piece of tappin' leather and brass sprigs (tacks or rivets) securing it to the shoe.

Tapping on the shoe on the iron foot would easily bend the top of the sprigs in the shoe so as to not interfere with the foot when wearing the shoe. The iron foot was always kept in the kitchen and work was done there, whether it was minor or extensive. In the case of repairing and replacing the leather with hemp twine, the twine was treated with bee's wax before passing it through the holes in the leather to make the hemp waterproof.

This particular iron foot appears to be an early version and was used in the Day family from the late 1800s to the mid 1900s. There was not much demand for the services of an iron foot beyond the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The iron foot was recently discovered under the house of Lorne Bond and he kindly donated it to the Sunny Cottage Heritage Centre for the heritage value that it contains.



## What's New on the Digital Archives

by *Jedediah Baker*

Our new website at [www.mun.ca/ich](http://www.mun.ca/ich) is really coming together. We've recently added a calendar ([www.mun.ca/ich/events](http://www.mun.ca/ich/events)) where you can find information about upcoming events related to Intangible Cultural Heritage, such as the St. John's Storytelling Festival from November 3-7, or the Cultural Tourism Conference in mid-November. Another new addition, small now but growing, is ICH Topic Collections. We already have a group of profiles for several communities on Fogo Island, as well as The Battery, but in addition to these community profiles there are several new collections: Ferryland Newfoundland Constabulary, Boat Building, and Christmas Traditions. The Boat Building collection draws on the extensive collection of traditional boat building resources in the DAI, and will be supplemented by interviews and photographs collected at the upcoming 2nd Annual Wooden Boat Conference in Winterton. The Christmas Traditions collection is being worked on now, and will serve as a repository for artifacts and information collected over the next few months in preparation for the Mummers Festival.

## Place, Narrative, and New Media Symposium



On Thursday, November 5th, 2009, the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador's Intangible Cultural Heritage program, as part of the annual St. John's Storytelling Festival, is organizing a half-day symposium on how new technologies are being incorporated into storytelling. Several invited speakers will detail how they are using new media or technology to tell the stories of real places.

Chris Brookes will speak about [Here]Say, a story map of Water street that allows people to listen to stories, via cell phone, about the location they are standing in at that moment. Marlene Brooks brings us news on 3D Virtual World Storytelling, and will explain how Conne River and Cupids 400 Projects are using Second Life to preserve cultural stories and local history. New York is only a click away: Jed Baker will explain how through his discussion of City of Memories. Parks Canada is implementing GPS based interpretation at a number of their sites and Cupids 400 will be launching an iTouch based interpretation of the 1610 archaeological site.

After brief presentations by all invited speakers, an open panel discussion of the potential of such technology, as well as some of the possible problems, will ensue. What are we able to accomplish and what would we like to be able to accomplish with these resources? How can technology help link place and story? Come see, share, and participate!

**Place, Narrative and New Media Symposium**  
**Celestial Gallery, Johnson GEO Centre, Signal Hill, St. John's, NL**  
**Thursday, November 5th, 2009 1pm-4pm**

Free admission to pre-registered participants. RSVP to Jed Baker at 737-3582 or [jedediah.edwin.baker@mun.ca](mailto:jedediah.edwin.baker@mun.ca)

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